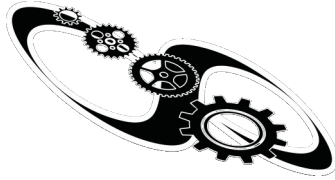


N Worlds

Small World

R. L. Herrero



Book I

N Worlds created by
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*To Susanna:
in the N Worlds,
you and I are always together.*

*To every cat and dog in the world,
and to the people who care for them,
cherish them, and share their lives with them.*

He raised his whip and struck very close to where I lay. Each blow made the ground shudder and crack. I dragged myself along, lacking even the strength to move within the armour. I raised my right arm in a desperate attempt to shield myself. Another lash, and the links tangled around me, tightening, suffocating, draining my life away.

My protection gave way; my strength failed. He looked upon me, and I could see his hollow sockets with those flames in place of eyes. His skin of black crystal gleamed in the starlight. He laughed. Never had I heard so wretched a laugh.

I tried to roll away and escape, but I could not.

I sought to reach my sword, but he got there first.

He laughed again.

He raised the great blade and drove it into my chest.

I felt my flesh open and my voice flee in screams.

I grasped the edge that was splitting me in two.

I had no strength.

My eyes closed.

I surrendered.

I died.

Some Time Ago

My uncle's executor had summoned me to the property. Though my mother's brother had never been given to luxury or ostentation, I did not recall the great house in so deplorable a state. Upon passing through the gates of the once well-tended garden, I plunged into a botanist's nightmare: weeds growing in every direction, places of leisure — such as my uncle and aunt's reading corner — overrun by ivy and other opportunistic plants. Thorns, thistles, and a host of invaders had seized the stage of my childhood, deforming it, distorting my memories of those warm summer afternoons years before. Melancholy took hold of my heart: "Oh, dear uncle, you must have suffered greatly in your final days." I must have thought it aloud, for someone replied.

"He was a fascinating man, your uncle, my dear Susanne."

"Good day, Mr Mallard. I did not hear you arrive."

"My apologies if I have startled you, young lady. This setting rather lends itself to believing in ghosts," the executor laughed.

He had been a friend of my uncle's for more than thirty years. Together they had embarked upon most prosperous ventures and together they had weathered great failures. Their friendship had reached the point of both becoming engaged to close friends and even celebrating their respective weddings in tandem, here, at the mansion that had served as the stage for those years of frenzy in commerce. For that reason, Mr Mallard insisted on saying that we were family, though we were not.

My uncle, Robert Wolfsmith, was my mother's elder brother, and as such had always had a weakness for her and for us — all the more so since my grandfather had died when they were children, and it was he who had been obliged, from the age of fourteen, to act as head of the family and manage my grandmother's estate. He succeeded in a good many of his investments, and for some years Wolfsmith Industries was a name of note even on the Continent. Having had no children with his wife, whose name I bear, the two of them had always felt a particular fondness for me. My mother recounts, by way of anecdote, that one Christmas Eve on which the spirits flowed rather too freely, my uncle went so far as to offer her a staggering sum of pounds for my adoption — but that she would never have allowed her daughter to be raised by a couple so given to exotic climes, exotic beverages, and exotic substances.

Robert Wolfsmith was a man of cheerful temperament and must have been a most coveted bachelor, not solely on account of his many enterprises: he possessed a commanding voice that adorned his wit and displayed a sense of humour that made him the centre of any gathering, though he had eyes only for my Aunt Sue. They met overseas and were never parted. Together they travelled the world, devoured thousands of books, cultivated unu-

sual plants in their conservatory, and reared all manner of creatures brought from the five continents. For me, to visit them was to venture into a world of science, of culture — a world free from the corsets that imprisoned the London of those days. I suppose it was from those afternoons of reading, laughing, delighting in their animals — in short, of living with them — that my calling to study was born, rather than to seek a husband... until Michael came along: the insistent and promising physician, Michael. I know that my mother loved my uncle and aunt, yet I also know she did not look with favour upon their way of life and how they had influenced me. They were a fascinating couple, united by an almost pathological thirst for knowledge. A city newspaper had devoted a feature to them — which my uncle displayed with pride, framed upon the wall of his study — entitled "The Marriage That the Royal Geographical Society Envis."

That is why it surprised no one when he shut himself away in this house after my aunt's disappearance during one of their journeys.

Now, years later, he too had gone, and I was the heiress to his broken dreams.

"Let us go inside, Mr Mallard; a mist is rising."

"Is your fiancé not accompanying you, my dear?"

"What has Michael to do with any of this?" I asked, offended, but the executor merely smiled.

The interior of the house was a reflection of the exterior. Neglect and decay in every corner. The library, in disarray and with many of its volumes scattered upon the floor, appeared to have been the victim of some calamity. The great drawing room, where they used to gather friends and family, its furniture shrouded in sheets and a thick layer of dust, recalled a wake. The musty smell obliged me to open one of the windows and to cover my mouth and nose with a handkerchief.

"Yes, do open it, if you please. It gives the impression that your uncle sealed off this wing of the house many years ago, Miss Susanne."

"He never recovered after what happened to his wife."

"What a horrible and enigmatic misfortune. To vanish like that, without a trace. We grew quite distant, you know. My wife has always blamed him for dragging your aunt — her dear bosom friend — across half the world, though I can attest she went most willingly."

"Indeed, but I understand that grief may have clouded your wife's judgement, Mr Mallard." My footsteps echoed through that house which I did not remember in silence — quite the contrary. I looked through one of the first-floor windows. At the far end of the garden, only the little rooftops of the stables protruded above the undergrowth. "What became of my uncle and aunt's animals?"

"I cannot say. I suppose they would have been released before your uncle, too, departed. Well, you know — we never found any of them."

"They were his true family. My mother always said they loved them more than they loved us."

"Your uncle and aunt were an exceptional couple, my dear friend. But let us not allow sadness to overwhelm us." Mr Mallard's cheerful nature returned. "I have documents that you must sign in order to receive your inheritance. This property, once made presentable, could be worth a fortune."

"It is not my wish to part with it," I said, cutting him short.

"But its upkeep is costly, and, so far as I am aware, your income as a schoolmistress is rather meagre, my dear Susanne."

"If my uncle wished me to have this, I must honour his will. Besides, I intend to publish a novel before long, and that shall allow me to—" My uncle's executor could not suppress a roar of laughter. "What is so amusing, Mr Mallard?"

"Forgive me, but I very much doubt that any publisher in London will print the work of a woman — no offence intended. Still less that of an unknown schoolmistress."

"Mary Shelley did so, and with great success."

"Oh, come now — one in a century."

"One? No, sir. Valperga, Lodore, and The Last Man all bear her name."

"I was referring to one woman, and besides, everyone knows that little novel of hers — the famous one, the Modern Prometheus or whatever it is called — her only known work — must have been written by her husband."

"Not only Mary Shelley! There are also Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and Sara Coleridge."

"Name whomever you wish; your sex lacks the masculine inventiveness. What next? Entering Parliament? Come, my dear Susanne."

"Leave the papers I must sign and take your leave, Mr Mallard."

"Do not take offence, young lady. Do not take offence."

"I shall send them to you. Now, kindly remove yourself from my property."

The executor left the sheaves upon a dust-covered table and departed, cursing under his breath. I suppose he had wished to make me some offer advantageous to himself for this house, but I was not prepared to relinquish so many years of experience and memory.

I devoted more than three weeks to setting the old mansion to rights.

I cannot recall whether it was the first or the second afternoon I spent in the house, but I fancied I perceived a sound — a noise issuing from somewhere within my uncle and aunt's library. After much searching and the dis-

missal of possible causes, I reached the conclusion that it must be some warped or worm-eaten timber.

But the following day I heard it again. I was startled at the thought of an infestation of rats or insects, so I purchased several traps and informed myself of what was needful to properly cleanse the area around the books, though I refused to resort to smoking and using the ashes in order to drive away those unwelcome tenants. Instead, and thanks to my uncle and aunt's library, I employed a mixture of rue — a plant which, fortunately, still survived in Aunt Sue's garden — crushed and boiled, to which I added a measure of alcohol. Satisfied with my newly acquired abilities as an amateur chemist, I resolved to leave Wolfsmith Manor and return to the Connel family house; yet at the very moment I was closing the front door and preparing to cross the garden, something resembling my name sounded, mingled with the wind.

"Is someone there?" I asked in a thread of a voice, whilst my legs trembled, heralding a faint.

I smiled. The question was foolish, and all the more so for having spoken it aloud. I laughed and began to turn the key to lock the door, but I swear I heard my name again, this time far more distinctly. My heart raced wildly and I had to swallow hard. I gripped the door with both hands, for I did not trust my own balance. Whence came that voice? Who was calling me? I looked in both directions. No one, of course. The sun was already setting and I had a good stretch ahead of me before reaching home. I drew a deep breath and rallied my own spirits. "It is my imagination. Mother is right: so many books have made of me a credulous dreamer," I repeated to myself. The journey home felt interminable until I turned into Brompton Street and encountered my sister Alice.

"Susanne! What an agreeable coincidence! Come!"

"Ever so cheerful, Alice. Whatever provokes such excitement, sister?" I smiled. At fifteen years of age, my younger

sister was a vain young lady whose interests ranged from securing a husband to marrying well — with all the rich variety that lay between those distant poles — and yet her presence never failed to gladden me. Alice dwelt in a wonderland quite unlike my own; that much was plain.

"You simply must see what they have put in Harrods, sister!" She tugged at my arm with urgency. "Oh, no. More absurd French fashion," I thought, yet I mustered the finest of my smiles so as not to wound my sister's feelings. That was another of Alice Connel's abiding interests, shared also by our middle sister, Dorothea. "Hurry, Susanne. I have been looking for you. You are going to adore this."

We hastened to the doors of the great department store — a place of near-pilgrimage for my mother and my sisters — and I could see a multitude pressing together.

"If you are about to show me the new Parisian hat, I promise you, Alice, we shall cease to be family," I protested.

"No, no. Look," she said, as she parted the crowd with audacity and the most genteel of "excuse me"s, positioning us before the shop window. "No more climbing stairs, sister."

Fascinating. Rumours had circulated for some weeks about what was being done at Harrods, particularly after the vast reconstruction of the building which had fallen victim to a fire years before, but this would set it apart from its competitors. If the establishment already distinguished itself by its novelties, what they had accomplished was nothing less than placing London at the forefront of the future.

"How is it possible?" said a gentleman in a top hat beside me.

"I do not believe it is safe," grumbled an elderly woman.

"It frightens me, Mother," exclaimed a boy who endea-

voured to hide behind his mother's skirt, she being as mesmerised by the shop window as all those present.

The staircase connecting the lower floor to the upper moved of its own accord. Some contrivance caused its steps to advance. I cannot say how long I stood, spell-bound, watching that marvel.

"Susanne, it is very late. We ought to go home," my sister implored.

"Of course, little one." I smiled. "Thank you for showing me this."

"I knew you would like it. You are ever so clever. Mother has said we shall have something special for supper tonight. Come along!"

Supper proceeded as was customary, with my sisters talking without cease and my mother calling for silence, mindful of my father's absence. I did not utter a word, my thoughts lingering upon the ingenuity of those moving staircases at Harrods. "What marvels we shall witness thanks to technology," I mused.

I withdrew, pleading fatigue, and prepared to sleep with a book in my hands.

The following day I returned to my routine of lessons with my young pupils and the task of making my new dwelling habitable. I cleaned with care at least half a dozen wardrobes of my uncle and aunt's clothing, each more astonishing than the last for the quantity and variety of garments. I was in the process of disposing of several, placing them in the street for the benefit of those in need, when I heard my name quite distinctly. I turned round, frightened. I cast my question into the air:

"Who is there?"

No one answered. A faintness threatened within. I quickened my step and withdrew into the house. That night, upon returning to my mother's home, I found it exceedingly difficult to sleep.

During those days I discovered many of the marvels that my uncle and aunt had amassed in their travels across the globe and, to my good fortune, I did not hear my name again — a matter I had already catalogued as "a piece of nonsense born of my own fancies."

Owing to my scant financial means, I was obliged to undertake all the cleaning and repairs myself after lessons, all the more so since Michael proved to be nothing but a hindrance, hell-bent on selling the property — yet in little under three weeks, Wolfsmith Manor was once again a habitable place.

My mother flew into a fury when I communicated my intention to move. "A young schoolmistress such as yourself, alone in that sinister pile. Have you taken leave of what little sense you possess, Susanne?" was her response. Mine was to gather four cherished belongings, half a dozen necessities, a little milk, some tea, and to quit her house.

I confess now that the first night was difficult.

My fiancé was waiting for me at the main gate of Wolfsmith Manor.

"So you intend to make a home of this?" was his greeting.

"Good evening, Michael."

"Will you not invite me in for tea at your new and — whatever word might describe this accumulation of disasters?"

"Michael."

"What, Susanne? You are not going to sell this decrepit wreck of a mansion? We could obtain a handsome sum, my dear. I thought we were agreed upon our plan for life."

"It is your plan for life, Michael," I stressed the word

your. "Yours. It would appear that you and my mother have come to an understanding remarkably well. It is quite clear that, to the pair of you, I count for nothing."

"Oh, my dear, how very confused you are. Do you not wish to be the wife of one of London's finest surgeons? Do you not wish to give me children?"

I looked into his eyes. Not a trace remained of the smooth-tongued charmer who had whispered promises of eternal love into my ears. I saw only a nervous and wretched medical student, consumed by avarice, rubbing his hands before the inheritance of a fool whom he had beguiled with his bearing and his eloquence, terrified that such a dowry might slip away.

"It is the very last thing I desire at this moment," I managed to stammer with all the firmness I could muster.

"I do want children! And you shall give them to me!" he said, without a shred of humanity upon his countenance.

I suppose the absence of witnesses seemed to him sufficient reason to make a scene, abandoning his hitherto exquisite manners of a supposed British lord, for he became violent and disagreeable. He began to shout at me, to insult me; he called me ungrateful and went so far as to raise his hand to strike me. My right knee shattered what little virility he possessed. Doubled over and in pain, he retreated, uttering threats.

I was trembling, yet at the same time I felt filled with a power I had never known. Never a voice raised, never an opinion given, never anything done that was not becoming of a London lady. I smiled, wondering what Michael would tell my mother.

I drew a deep breath, beheld the silhouette of Wolfsmith Manor cut against the moon, and entered my new home.

The weeks of toil had borne their fruit, and the mansion recalled its finest days. The scent of fresh flowers —

something that had never been wanting in my Aunt Sue's lifetime, and which I had resolved to restore — welcomed me.

I did not occupy the master bedchamber, out of some absurd superstition or timid respect for my uncle and aunt's memory, and slept instead in the room they had set aside for me in my childhood. Strange noises pervaded the property and prevented me from finding true rest. I rose, went down to the kitchen, and prepared a cup of tea sweetened with a little honey. Then I heard it more clearly: a broken mew, a feline voice I remembered. Was it possible? "Raffaello?" I asked the air.

He appeared from amongst the shadows. He was just as he had been years ago. White, plump, with that blue gaze that seemed to comprehend everything humans said to him, only to act precisely as he pleased. He rubbed against my feet and I lifted him up.

"What an agreeable surprise, my dear cousin!" I had always regarded my uncle and aunt's animals as "my cousins." To find Raffaello was to recover a living fragment of my memories. "However have you managed all alone here, little one?"

He mewed as harbour cats mew — with anguish and impudence — and rubbed against my face. I searched for something with which to feed the animal. He took milk and I took tea. Though the warm drink comforted me, my mind could not rest and wandered amongst the memories of my youth, the sadness, and the disappointment with Michael. With no small effort and several false starts of smoke and near-conflagration, I lit the library fireplace and sought something to occupy my thoughts. It was no easy task to choose a volume. Anthropology, physics, botany, medicine, engineering... It appeared that everything was of interest to my uncle and aunt. I searched amongst the novels, but that was almost worse, for they were written in more than ten languages, and my knowledge beyond a rudimentary French was nil.

It was then that I noticed Raffaello would not cease rubbing himself against four books, exquisitely bound, which occupied a place very near the writing desk. There was no inscription upon their spines. I took one up with care — almost with trepidation.

They were my uncle and aunt's travel journals. I know not which of the two was capable of drawing with such mastery, but the texts were accompanied by beautiful illustrations depicting landscapes, animals, and objects unknown in London. I cannot reckon how long I spent reading that first volume, but dawn took me by surprise. With great vexation I prepared myself to give my lessons at the school and made my way thither. The day seemed an eternity until I could return to my new home, be greeted by Raffaello, and resume my reading. Not a sign, thank heavens, of Michael.

It took me more than a week to finish the first of the volumes. In certain passages I doubted the accuracy of the words set down therein, for they read more like a work of fantastical fiction than a faithful account of reality. Men of eight feet in height? A beast with a horn upon its brow? If all of that were true, the world as we knew it had grown rather small.

My mother consented to visit me at the house after much entreaty. Her obstinacy relented when I told her I had begun to read my uncle and aunt's travel journals. I put on a handsome dress and gathered my black hair into an elegant chignon. I had laid out tea and pastries in the drawing room so as to enjoy her company, but her arrival — in a state of considerable agitation — upset my plans.

"My child, you must not believe a single word of what your uncle has written in those books. Indeed, I do not consider them suitable reading."

"Mother, I cannot understand your concern. Robert and Sue visited the most extraordinary places. I would do anything to follow in their footsteps."

"Precisely! That woman was not a good influence upon your uncle. And your head is going to be filled with yet more ridiculous ideas, my dear."

"'Yet more ridiculous ideas?'" I said, indignant. "I do not know where you mean to go with this, but it is quite enough. It is my life, and I intend to live it as I see fit."

"Another piece of foolishness. You are nearly twenty years old and still unmarried, my child! What has happened with Michael? He came to the house not long ago, in a terrible fury, saying you had taken leave of your senses. My child, he is a good man and is going to have a splendid profession that—"

"Oh, please, Mother. Not that again. I too have a profession."

"You call it a profession, teaching the children of well-to-do families? You are a servant to them! And what is to become of you? You will never find a position if you persist in that. And now you take a fancy to this old house. That is all I needed. You know you will not be able to afford it for long. Mr Mallard has told me—"

"Mr Mallard is an ambitious man who means to seize my uncle and aunt's legacy."

"But he will give you a handsome sum of money!"

"Money is not everything, Mother! I knew perfectly well that you, Michael, and Mallard had already reached a decision! But now it is I who choose!" We were both shouting now, without the slightest restraint.

"I do not know what is happening to you, Susanne! I do not recognise you, my child! You could stop teaching the alphabet to those ill-mannered brats!"

"I enjoy my work, Mother."

"Work is beneath a Connel."

"I am not a Connel! Look at me! You are fair, like my sisters, and I am dark! We both know full well that your red-haired husband adopted me to spare you the disgrace."

I deserved the slap. My mother rose, fixed me with a look of contempt, and left. We did not speak again. To recall her "unfortunate indiscretion" had offended her beyond any forgiveness. That was what I was — the "unfortunate indiscretion" of a young woman of London's high society, concealed by an apparent voyage to the Continent from which we returned with a husband for my mother and a father for me, paid for by my grandmother's fortune. All of this I knew thanks to my uncle, who confessed it to me when I turned fifteen and celebrated at his house, with him and his wife, a party at which spirits and other substances circulated without measure — and at last I understood why my mother had always belittled me before my sisters and the man I believed to be my father.

My mother had not forgiven her brother the indiscretion. For my part, I had not forgiven her.

My face burned more from anger than from the blow. I gathered the teacups, the untouched pastries, and returned to the library to continue my reading. The second volume explored in detail various devices that my uncle and aunt had wished to develop in order to pursue their travels. Knowing almost nothing of engineering, I found it dense and tedious, and I turned the pages swiftly past diagrams of relays, bearings, gears, and further apparatus driven for the most part by steam. At the end of the book's annotations, one could see the drawing of a ship with balloons in place of sails. Raffaello slept belly upward in another armchair.

Midnight arrived and caught me engrossed in an account of a journey that must, by all appearances, have been invented. I ought to say that my uncle and aunt were persons of vivid imagination and had delighted me, even in my childhood, with fabulous stories — of which my mother did not approve, naturally.

That night I dreamt of recovering my uncle and aunt, of seeing them in those distant and exotic worlds, of being able to visit all those places, to witness those marvels for myself. I awoke resolved to achieve it. Perhaps it was not such a poor idea to accept the executor's offer so that I might travel as my uncle and aunt had done — but first I needed to inventory the entire property and secure a better price.

It took me more than two days to compile a list of everything that might add value to the house. However modest a sum it might fetch, it would amount to far more than a schoolmistress's salary over many years of dedication.

I found some of my aunt's jewels, some coins I did not recognise, and mementoes of their travels — but what truly astonished me was what I discovered one afternoon in the cellar. A motor car! It was one of those new contraptions, manufactured by Benz, the celebrated German industrialist. I could already picture myself causing a sensation in London, where they were a most scarce commodity. It had been covered by a heavy tarpaulin all those years, yet appeared to be in perfect condition. I was surprised that my uncle and aunt should have possessed one, hidden away for so long, when they were only now beginning to be seen upon the streets.

There was an enormous quantity of odds and ends in that part of the house, each more peculiar than the last. Many I did not recognise, but all appeared to serve some purpose or perform some function. I was aware of my uncle's sometimes outlandish ventures in patenting curious inventions, but the majority of the objects were unknown to me. I spotted a couple that put me in mind of some of the designs recorded in my uncle and aunt's journals, and at the far end I observed heavy curtains upon one of the walls.

I drew them aside and discovered a stout wooden door flanked by pipes, conduits, and relays, with great gear wheels resembling those of a clockmaker, many gleaming bolts — the whole connected to something akin to a steam pump. Glass ampoules containing a strange amber liquid crowned the threshold. Two wooden crossbeams barred the way. I rapped with my knuckles. It was solid timber, trimmed with metal and heavy screws. To its right was something resembling a panel fitted with various levers. I tried several of those switches, but nothing occurred. Then I recalled having read something about this curious mechanism in the books. I hurried to the library and sought out the second volume. I turned the pages in haste, endeavouring to find the description of that door and how to set it in operation. Yes — there it was. From what I could make out, I needed to fire the steam engine in order to supply power to the device that would open it. What could my uncle and aunt have concealed there? And above all, where did it lead? My sense of direction had never been especially keen, but a swift calculation told me that the door must open onto some place underground. Another hidden cellar? In all the years of my life visiting my uncle and aunt and roaming every corner of Wolfsmith Manor, I had never once seen that door. The intrigue made my heart beat very fast.

The days spent in the mansion had made of me an expert in lighting fireplaces, so it did not take me long to coax the contraption into hissing with steam. Some gear wheels turned in circles, others moved up and down. A needle on the panel indicated something upon reaching a red band. I tried pressing several of the buttons.

With a hoarse sound, the crossbeams slid upon the metal wheels and the door opened, its leaves parting to the sides. A tremor ran through the entire house. As the leaves drew apart, an intense light flooded the room. The cellar, dark and dismal until that moment, was now bathed in such brilliance that I had to shield my eyes with my hands. It was like gazing

at the sun. A rush of heat forced me back. I feared I had activated some dangerous apparatus, that the door opened onto a furnace ablaze. My fear vanished when a cool breeze brushed my skin and I could smell a fragrance of spring. Even so, I opened my eyes with caution.

It could not be true. No. I was asleep and dreaming, I thought.

There was a field beyond the door. A field bathed in brilliant light, of a green that recalled the warmth of summer, with towering mountains in the distance and a river to the right. But it was November of 1898, and it was night. It was impossible. It had to be some manner of trick devised by my uncle and aunt. I tried stretching out my arm, and it warmed as on an August afternoon. I withdrew it in fright.

Then I saw her: she was coming towards me at great speed.

Fear seized my mind and I pressed every button and lever in utter disarray. The door closed. I breathed with relief — but then I heard a high-pitched voice, almost childlike, behind me.

"Vi sei suprotre. ¿Sei niecerba?"

I fainted.

When I came to, I smiled. What a jest my mind had played upon me, I thought — but at that moment I heard the little voice once more.

"Sei niecerba. ¡Niecerba! ¡Niecerba!"

There it was, floating a yard from me, striking the door. It could not have measured more than four or five inches, and it flew — but it was a person. A very small person who turned upon hearing me and confronted me at close quarters.

"¡Niecerba! ¡Vi malfermu! ¡Pordo malfermu min!"

I could see her more clearly now. She was a woman, with all her attributes, but the size of a middling bird. She had wings that appeared crystalline and moved with great rapidity. She wore curious garments in dark colours. A small top hat, with a pair of strange goggles upon it, adorned her tiny head. Her right hand was covered by a fingerless glove, and her left was bare. She wore a corset and trousers with many diminutive buckles, and upon her feet were little boots that recalled those of soldiers. A frock coat of something resembling reptile leather completed her attire. Her hair was blue.

And she was very angry indeed.